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Morality and Sociability in Commercial Society: Smith, Rousseau—and Mandeville

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In 1756 Adam Smith reviewed Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* and claimed that it was indebted to the second volume of Bernard Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees*. While much recent scholarship has taken this as the point of departure for studying Smith's engagement with Rousseau, the place of Mandeville in shaping that engagement has been largely neglected. This article brings Mandeville back into the picture and reassesses Smith's engagement with both thinkers in light of the connections he identified between their works. This involves reconstructing Mandeville's historicized account of the development of sociability and government, and showing how Rousseau developed this to articulate his critique of modern society. In evaluating Smith's response to this challenge, it is argued that he only partially succeeded in distancing his own analysis of commercial society from Mandeville's principles.

In his "Letter to the *Edinburgh Review*" of 1756, Adam Smith offered one of the first commentaries on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality Among Men*. "Whoever reads this last work with attention," Smith remarked, "will observe, that the second volume of the Fable of the Bees has given occasion to the system of Mr. Rousseau" (*ER*, 250).¹ While other early readers of Rousseau's

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¹ The following abbreviations are used for frequently cited primary sources. For Smith: *ER* = "Letter to the *Edinburgh Review*," in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. W. P. D. Wightman and J. C. Bryce (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), 242-256; *LJ* = *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, ed. R. L. Meek, D. D. Raphael and P. G. Stein (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982); *TMS* = *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed.

Discourse associated it more generally with Epicureanism and Hobbism,² Smith appears to have been unique in emphasizing not just its debt to Bernard Mandeville, but, more specifically, to the second volume of his infamous work. Smith's comments have provided some inspiration for those who have sought to uncover the parallels between Mandeville and Rousseau,³ but they also provide an important insight into his own thinking at the time and how he viewed certain problems that he would confront in his later works. Why, then, did Smith associate Rousseau with Mandeville, and what does this tell us about his engagement with both thinkers?

D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982); *WN* = *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1981). For ease of comparison with other editions, references to *TMS* and *WN* are given by part/section/chapter/paragraph numbers as appropriate. For Mandeville: *FB* = *The Fable of the Bees, or Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, ed. F.B. Kaye in 2 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988). References are given as *FB* I or *FB* II to denote the volume, followed by page numbers. For Rousseau: *DOI* = *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men*, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 3, ed. Christopher Kelly and Roger D. Masters (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1992), 1-95.

² Louis-Bertrand Castel, *L'homme moral opposé à l'homme physique de Monsieur R****. Lettres philosophiques où l'on réfute le Déisme du jour* (Toulouse, 1756), 57-58, 173-174; Jean de Castillon, *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité parmi les hommes, pour servir de réponse au discours que M. Rousseau, Citoyen de Genève, a publié sur le même sujet* (Amsterdam: J. F. Jolly, 1756), 129, 255-266.

³ Malcolm Jack, "One State of Nature: Mandeville and Rousseau." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 39, no 1 (1978): 119-124; Edward J. Hundert, *The Enlightenment's Fable: Bernard Mandeville and the Discovery of Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 105-115; idem. "Mandeville, Rousseau and the Political Economy of Fantasy," in *Luxury in the Eighteenth-Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods*, ed. Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Elgar (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 28-40; Mauro Simonazzi, "Bernard Mandeville e Jean-Jacques Rousseau," in *La filosofia politica di Rousseau*, ed. Giulio M. Chiode and Roberto Gatti (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2012), 231-237.

The “Letter” has become a key text in the recent “explosion of scholarship” on Rousseau and Smith,⁴ since it provides us with Smith’s earliest and most detailed remarks on Rousseau. Indeed, it is the strongest evidence indicating that he was concerned with Rousseau’s ideas at all, and is thus the basis for establishing any sort of historical relationship between the two thinkers. Getting this relationship right, in turn, is deemed especially significant given that Rousseau and Smith are arguably two of the earliest and most penetrating theorists of commercial society.⁵ Rousseau is usually regarded as its greatest eighteenth-century critic and Smith as the first person to respond to Rousseau’s concerns while defending commercial society.⁶

The purpose of this article is to bring Mandeville back into the picture. In so far as the “Letter” provides clues to the problems that troubled Smith in the late 1750s, I argue that it was Mandeville—more than Rousseau—who was really on his mind. While the “Letter” has inspired many scholars to think more carefully about both the historical and the philosophical connections between Smith and

⁴ The quote is from Dennis C. Rasmussen’s brief survey of the extant scholarship, “Adam Smith and Rousseau: Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Adam Smith*, ed. Christopher J. Berry, Maria Pia Paganelli and Craig Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 54-56.

⁵ The term “commercial society” is associated principally with Smith. It is a society in which the division of labor is so entrenched that everyone “lives by exchanging, or becomes in some measure a merchant” (WN, I.iv.1). This also implies a psychological component, as such a society can subsist “from a sense of its utility, without any mutual love or affection,” through commercial exchange and observation of the rule of justice (TMS, II.ii.3.2). See also Istvan Hont, *Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith*, ed. Béla Kapossy and Michael Sonenscher (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 3-4. While neither Mandeville nor Rousseau used the term “commercial society,” it is plausible to view them as having analyzed the type of society that Smith classified as commercial.

⁶ Michael Ignatieff, “Smith, Rousseau and the Republic of Needs,” in *Scotland and Europe 1200-1850*, ed. T.C. Smout (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1986) 187-189; Ryan Patrick Hanley, “Commerce and Corruption: Rousseau’s Diagnosis and Adam Smith’s Cure,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 7, no 2 (2008): 137-138; Dennis C. Rasmussen, *The Problems and Promise of Commercial Society: Adam Smith’s Response to Rousseau* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 5.

Rousseau, the same cannot be said of the connections between Smith and Mandeville. This article seeks to redress the balance. In particular, I focus on Mandeville's historicized account of the development of human sociability and government to reveal its affinities with Rousseau's better-known arguments. Mandeville's account challenges anyone who thinks that humans are naturally sociable creatures or who seeks to defend the moral character of commercial society—a challenge reinforced by, but not original to, Rousseau's *Discourse*. I argue that while Smith set out important aspects of his moral philosophy against Mandeville, his own account of both the origins and inner workings of commercial society relies on a more Mandevillean analysis than he ever acknowledged.⁷ In short, Smith's attempt to distance his defense of commercial society from the Mandeville-Rousseau position was a partial, but not complete, success.

Although this article addresses a question principally of interest to Smith scholars, it brings a historical perspective to bear on questions about the morality of commercial society that continue to divide critics and proponents of capitalism. Indeed, some contemporary critics still regard Mandeville

⁷ Smith was concerned to distance his moral philosophy from Mandeville and appears troubled by what we can assume was the suggestion that he had not done so. See Adam Smith, "Letter to Gilbert Elliot," in *Correspondence of Adam Smith*, ed. E. C. Mossner and I. S. Ross (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987), 49. The possibility that Smith's moral philosophy failed to refute Mandeville tends to receive more of a hearing in scholarship focused primarily on Mandeville than on Smith. See Thomas A. Horne, "Envy and Commercial Society: Mandeville and Smith on 'Private Vices, Public Benefits,'" *Political Theory* 9, no 4 (1981): 562-565; Dario Castiglione, "Considering Things Minutely: Reflections on Mandeville and the Eighteenth-Century Science of Man," *History of Political Thought* 7, no 4 (1986): 485; Maurice M. Goldsmith, "Regulating Anew the Moral and Political Sentiments of Mankind: Bernard Mandeville and the Scottish Enlightenment," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 49, no 4 (1988): 603-604; Hundert, *Enlightenment's Fable*, 219-236; Bert Kerkhof, "A fatal attraction? Smith's 'theory of moral Sentiments' and Mandeville's 'fable,'" *History of Political Thought* 16, no 2 (1995): 219-23; Jennifer Welchman, "Who Rebutted Bernard Mandeville?" *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 24, no 1 (2007): 68-69. None of these studies, however, consider in detail how Smith's arguments compare to the historical account of sociability from the second volume of the *Fable*, and only Hundert's makes anything more than passing reference to Rousseau and/or the "Letter to the *Edinburgh Review*."

as the one person who saw capitalism for what it really is, while dismissing the possibility that Smith provided a (successful) defense of its moral character.⁸ While such critics are right to uncover an important challenge to commercial morality in Mandeville, they overlook the possibilities for answering Mandeville—and rescuing commercial society—explored by his immediate successors. Few defenders of commercial society have ever taken its moral shortcomings as seriously as Smith, so evaluating the extent to which he distanced his thought from Mandeville should be of broader interest for those who think that the latter divined the true nature of capitalism.

I proceed by examining the “Letter to the *Edinburgh Review*” in more detail to uncover why Smith associated Rousseau with Mandeville. I then elucidate the challenge posed by Mandeville’s arguments in the second volume of the *Fable* and show how elements of this challenge were accentuated by Rousseau. With this challenge outlined, I move on to assessing the extent to which Smith distanced himself from Mandeville’s principles. By way of conclusion, I consider an illustrative example to suggest how attending to the nuances of the Mandeville-Rousseau-Smith debate can help us to think more carefully about the moral character of commercial society.

Mandeville’s Place in Smith’s “Letter”

Why did Smith think that the second volume of *The Fable of the Bees* gave rise to the system of Rousseau? Somewhat surprisingly, this question has been widely neglected in existing scholarship on Rousseau and Smith, in which Mandeville often appears as little more than a peripheral figure. Some studies do not discuss him at all,⁹ and others mention him only briefly without analyzing his ideas in

⁸ G. A. Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 77-79; Robert Skidelsky and Edward Skidelsky, *How Much is Enough? Money and the Good Life* (London: Penguin, 2013), 48-53.

⁹ Michael Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984); Christopher J. Berry, “Adam Smith: Commerce, Liberty and Modernity,” in *Philosophers of the Enlightenment*, ed. Peter Gilmour (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble, 1990), 113-132; Ryan Patrick Hanley, “From Geneva to Glasgow: Rousseau and Adam

any detail.¹⁰ One reason for this neglect is suggested by R. A. Leigh's comment that "for the modern reader, [Smith] perhaps stresses too much what he takes to be the influence of Mandeville on Rousseau."¹¹ Studies that have focused on all three thinkers tend to endorse this view, concluding that on many issues "Rousseau is diametrically opposed to Mandeville,"¹² or that there are "insurmountable differences between Mandeville and Rousseau," with Smith only identifying "a superficial similarity" between them.¹³ Yet Smith recognized that there were genuine differences between Mandeville and Rousseau, but nonetheless thought that the points where they align proved especially significant. Even if he was wrong to associate Mandeville and Rousseau so closely—a view I challenge here—the reasons why he did so would still prove important for understanding how he viewed certain problems at the time.¹⁴

Smith on the Theater and Commercial Society," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 35 (2006): 177-202; idem., "Enlightened Nation Building: The "Science of the Legislator" in Adam Smith and Rousseau," *American Journal of Political Science* 52, no 2 (2008): 219-234.

¹⁰ E. G. West, "Adam Smith and Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*: Inspiration or Provocation?" *Journal of Economic Issues* 5, no 2 (1971): 68; Ignatieff, "Republic of Needs," 189, 200-201; Spencer J. Pack, "The Rousseau-Smith Connection: Towards an Understanding of Professor West's "Splenic Smith"," *History of Economic Ideas* 8, no 2 (2000): 46, 49; Hanley, "Commerce and Corruption," 146-147; Charles L. Griswold, "Smith and Rousseau in dialogue: Sympathy, *pitié*, spectatorship and narrative," in *The Adam Smith Review, volume 5: Essays Commemorating the 250th anniversary of the Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Vivienne Brown and Samuel Fleischacker (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 61, 63.

¹¹ R. A. Leigh, "Rousseau and the Scottish Enlightenment," *Contributions to Political Economy* 5, no 1 (1986): 11-12.

¹² Lucio Colletti, *From Rousseau to Lenin*, trans. John Marrington and Judith White (London: NLB, 1972), 197.

¹³ Jimena Hurtado Prieto, "Bernard Mandeville's heir: Adam Smith or Jean Jacques Rousseau on the possibility of economic analysis," *The European Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 11, no 1 (2004): 2, 4-14.

¹⁴ Equally, however, we should be wary of inferring intellectual influence too quickly given the difficulty of knowing precisely why Smith wrote the "Letter." See Paul Sagar, "Smith and Rousseau, after Hume and Mandeville," *Political Theory*, online first (2016). Sagar's caution regarding the "Letter" is in response to stronger

In many of the most detailed and nuanced discussions of the “Letter to the *Edinburgh Review*,” the question of why Smith focused on the *second* volume of the *Fable* is rarely asked.¹⁵ This is important given that Mandeville’s position underwent significant changes between the different volumes, to the extent that one recent commentator even concludes that the two volumes “do not appear to have that much in common apart from the title and the author.”¹⁶ What is more, the two volumes were first published together only in 1755, so Smith would have originally encountered them as separate works.¹⁷

positions than that defended here and, more broadly, we agree that the influence of Rousseau on Smith has been overstated. While our arguments are complementary, Sagar takes a different approach by largely leaving the “Letter” aside and instead arguing on independent grounds that Mandeville, and especially Hume, were more important than Rousseau as interlocutors for Smith.

¹⁵ For example Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750-1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 66-76; Eric Schliesser, “Adam Smith’s benevolent and self-interested conception of philosophy,” in *New Voices on Adam Smith*, ed. Leonidas Montes and Eric Schliesser (London: Routledge, 2006), 343-346; Rasmussen, *Problems and Promise*, 59-71; Nicolas Phillipson, *Adam Smith: An Enlightened Life* (London: Penguin, 2010), 144-148; Shannon C. Stimson, “The General Will after Rousseau: Smith and Rousseau on Sociability and Inequality,” in *The General Will: The Evolution of a Concept*, ed. James Farr and David Lay Williams (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 353-358. Two notable exceptions are Pierre Force, *Self-Interest before Adam Smith: A Genealogy of Economic Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 34; and Hont, *Politics in Commercial Society*, 19-20. Both rightly point out that the second volume of the *Fable* focuses more on the historical development of society and sociability, but neither examines this development in any detail and it has little impact on the main claims they make about the relationship between Rousseau and Smith.

¹⁶ Mikko Tolonen, *Mandeville and Hume: anatomists of civil society* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2013), 134.

¹⁷ Tolonen, *Mandeville and Hume*, 156, and see 103-146 more generally on the publishing history of the *Fable*. Tolonen quotes Smith’s remark about volume two of the *Fable* as evidence that its influence “remained a well-established fact in eighteenth-century Scottish thought” (156). However, he provides no further discussion of the aspects of Mandeville’s thought that Smith associated with Rousseau.

To see why Smith identified the second volume of the *Fable* as Rousseau's inspiration, it is necessary to examine the "Letter" in some detail. Smith proceeds by imploring the *Review* to extend its scope beyond Scotland and take notice of important works published elsewhere in Europe, which, in practice, would involve focusing mainly on France and England. After surveying some of the literary and scientific achievements of both nations, Smith turns to consider "morals, metaphysics and part of the abstract sciences." All improvements in modern times with regards to these have been made in England, and he lists Hobbes, Locke, Mandeville, Shaftesbury, Butler, Clarke and Hutcheson as all having made original contributions to this branch of philosophy (*ER*, 249-250). However, it has since been neglected by the English and taken up in France, most notably in Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*. Smith's commentary here is worth quoting at length:

Whoever reads this last work with attention, will observe, that the second volume of the *Fable of the Bees* has given occasion to the system of Mr. Rousseau, in whom however the principles of the English author are softened, improved, and embellished, and stript of all that tendency to corruption and licentiousness which has disgraced them in their original author. Dr. Mandeville represents the primitive state of mankind as the most wretched and miserable that can be imagined: Mr. Rousseau, on the contrary, paints it as the happiest and most suitable to his nature. Both of them however suppose, that there is in man no powerful instinct which necessarily determines him to seek society for its own sake: but according to the one, the misery of his original state compelled him to have recourse to this otherwise disagreeable remedy; according to the other, some unfortunate accidents having given birth to the unnatural passions of ambition and the vain desire of superiority, to which he had before been a stranger, produced the same fatal effect. Both of them suppose the same slow progress and gradual development of all the talents, habits, and arts which fit men to live together in society, and they both describe this progress pretty much in the same manner. According to both, those laws of justice, which maintain the present inequality amongst mankind, were originally the invention of the cunning and the powerful, in order to maintain or to acquire an unnatural and unjust superiority over the rest of their fellow creatures. Mr. Rousseau

however criticises upon Dr. Mandeville: he observes, that *pity*, the only amiable principle which the English author allows to be natural to man, is capable of producing all those virtues, whose reality Dr. Mandeville denies. Mr. Rousseau at the same time seems to think, that this principle is in itself no virtue, but that it is possessed by savages and by the most profligate of the vulgar, in a greater degree of perfection than by those of the most polished and cultivated manners; in which he perfectly agrees with the English author (*ER*, 250-251).

Smith adds that Rousseau's depiction of the life of savages is one-sided, focusing only on their indolence, but, in presenting the savage life as the happiest, "the principles of the profligate Mandeville seem in him to have all the purity and sublimity of the morals of Plato, and to be only the true spirit of a republican carried a little too far" (*ER*, 251). As the *Discourse* "consists almost entirely of rhetoric and description,"¹⁸ there would be no purpose in analyzing it further; instead, Smith translates three passages at length from the second volume of the *Discourse*, before noting his approval of Rousseau's dedication to the republic of Geneva (*ER*, 254).

Amongst scholars who have taken Smith's "Letter" as the starting point for evaluating his response to Rousseau, the most fruitful approach has been to focus on the three translated passages, some of which reappear in very similar form in his later works (where Rousseau is not mentioned explicitly).¹⁹ One consequence of foregrounding these passages, however, is that the comparison with

¹⁸ Some commentators have jumped on this comment to argue that Smith dismissed the substance of Rousseau's arguments and was interested only in his eloquence and style. See Hundert, *Enlightenment's Fable*, 220; West, "Inspiration or Provocation?" 69; Robert Wokler, "Todorov's Otherness," *New Literary History* 27, no 1 (1996): 52. However, this reading completely overlooks the reason why Smith was reviewing Rousseau's *Discourse* in the first place, which was to draw attention to the one French work, above all others, that had taken up the branch of modern philosophy lately neglected in England.

¹⁹ Schliesser, "Smith's conception of philosophy," 343-344; Hanley, "Commerce and Corruption," 139-140; Rasmussen, *Problems and Promise*, 68-71.

Mandeville drops into the background. My approach here instead foregrounds Smith's comparison of Mandeville and Rousseau to understand better his engagement with both thinkers.

Smith identifies four substantive points of agreement between Mandeville and Rousseau. He also notes some important points where the two diverge, but identifying the points of agreement seems to have been his overriding concern. He sometimes even accentuates these in order to downplay the differences, as the first point of comparison illustrates. Despite Mandeville having presented the primitive state of mankind as the most wretched, and Rousseau having presented it as the happiest, they both argue that humans have no natural instinct to seek society for its own sake. Throughout both volumes of the *Fable*, Mandeville consistently denied that humans naturally seek society for its own sake. His most nuanced defense of this denial, however, is developed in the final dialogues of volume two, published in 1728, where, for the first time, he examines the historical causes of human sociability in detail (*FB* II, especially 177-193). This is much the same approach to the question of human sociability as Rousseau takes in the *Discourse*, so focusing on the second volume of the *Fable* is key when assessing the extent to which their views on sociability converge.

The allusion to the historicity of volume two of the *Fable* is stronger in the second point of agreement Smith identifies. While noting that Mandeville and Rousseau provide different reasons for why humans would have left their primitive state, Smith suggests that these differences amount to little, since they end up telling a very similar story about the slow progress in the arts, talents and habits that enabled humans to live together in society. The gradual, developmental account of society was one of the most important additions to Mandeville's later theory. Indeed, in volume two of the *Fable*, he arguably presents a "conjectural history" of sociability and government—a term that, retrospectively, was used to describe Smith's own approach,²⁰ but which equally applies to Mandeville and Rousseau. To understand the origins of political society, Mandeville explains, "I go directly to the Fountain Head, human Nature itself ... When Things are very obscure I sometimes make Use of Conjectures to find my Way" (*FB* II, 128). Similarly, Rousseau sought to provide "the hypothetical history of

²⁰ Dugald Stewart, "Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith," in Smith, *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, 293.

Governments,” based on “hypothetical and conditional reasonings” (*DOI*, 16, 19, 42). In each case, Mandeville and Rousseau speculate on how underlying principles of human nature would have developed in different stages of human history. It was most probably the historicity of volume two of the *Fable* that Smith had in mind when drawing the connection with Rousseau’s *Discourse*, which suggests that attending to his own historical analysis of the origins of society and government might help to reveal how he addressed the problems Mandeville and Rousseau were grappling with.

The third point of agreement is that Mandeville and Rousseau both think that the laws of justice were the invention of the cunning and powerful to consolidate their superiority over the poor.²¹ Smith might have had the first volume of the *Fable* in mind here, as in “An Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue” Mandeville notoriously argued that the first rules of morality were the invention of skillful politicians so “that the Ambitious might reap the more Benefit from, and govern vast Numbers of them with the greater Ease and Security” (*FB* I, 47). Rousseau presents a similar account of the origins of political societies as a confidence trick towards the end of the *Discourse* (*DOI*, 53-4). However, it is possible that Smith could have been referring to the second volume of the *Fable* here as well, where the account still relies on leaders emerging who learn to devise “various ways of curbing Mankind” (*FB* II, 268), even if this claim appears less striking as a result of having been integrated into Mandeville’s more developed historical narrative.

The fourth and final point of agreement concerns pity. Smith notes that Rousseau explicitly criticized Mandeville for failing to realize that pity is the source of many of the social virtues whose reality the *Fable* denies. This point does not refer to the second volume. Smith is pointing to the only explicit discussion of Mandeville in the *Discourse*, where Rousseau’s analysis is based on “An Essay on Charity, and Charity-Schools” from the (second edition of the) first volume of the *Fable* (*DOI*, 36-37; cf. *FB* I, 254-256). It has recently been suggested that Smith is praising Rousseau here for having

²¹ Smith advances a similar (but not identical) argument himself (*LJ*, 208, 404; *WN*, V.i.b.12). See also Pack, “Rousseau-Smith Connection,” 52-53; Schliesser, “Smith’s conception of philosophy,” 346, but cf. Hont, *Politics in Commercial Society*, 21-22, 48-49.

advanced beyond Mandeville.²² Once again, however, he appears more concerned with the underlying affinity between their positions, as they both maintain that pity is more prominent amongst savages and the vulgar than it is amongst civilized peoples. Even for Rousseau, Smith thinks, the principle of pity is not itself a virtue. While Smith would similarly argue that pity may even be found amongst criminals and “is by no means confined to the virtuous and humane” (*TMS*, I.i.1.1), he also sought to refute the idea (as I show later) that sociable sentiments are more prevalent amongst savages than civilized peoples.

From the foregoing analysis it should be clear that when Smith identified volume two of Mandeville’s *Fable* as the inspiration for Rousseau’s *Discourse*, he most probably had in mind their conjectural histories of society and government. To see why this matters for understanding his engagement with both thinkers it is necessary to elucidate Mandeville’s conjectural history in more detail and show how, channeled through Rousseau, it challenges the moral character of modern society.

Mandeville’s Challenge, Channeled through Rousseau

In “A Search into the Nature of Society,” Mandeville proclaimed that “it is impossible we could be sociable Creatures without Hypocrisy” (*FB* I, 349), since living in civil society involves concealing and masking our naturally unsociable passions. The question of human sociability pitted Mandeville against the third Earl of Shaftesbury and this remained one of the central themes of volume two of the *Fable*, which comprises six dialogues between Cleomenes, representing Mandeville, and Horatio, who starts out as an admirer of Shaftesbury but is converted by the dénouement.

One of the most important developments in volume two is Mandeville’s distinction between self-love and self-liking.²³ Self-love is the desire all animals have for their own preservation. Self-liking is more complicated. Not only do we overvalue ourselves in relation to others, but, moreover, our

²² Hont, *Politics in Commercial Society*, 20, 26.

²³ For more extensive accounts of how this distinction plays out in the historical narrative of volume two see Hundert, *Enlightenment’s Fable*, 52-115; Tolonen, *Mandeville and Hume*, 65-102.

awareness of this makes us uneasy and gives rise to a desire to have our worth affirmed by others: “the Approbation, Liking and Assent of others ... strengthen and confirm us in the good Opinion we have of ourselves” (*FB II*, 129-130). Self-liking, then, is the passion that leads us to desire the good opinions of others and it frequently manifests itself in pride. This passion is central to understanding how we could ever have become sociable for Mandeville, as is most apparent in his discussion of politeness.

Mandeville argues that self-liking would lead to war and contention amongst untaught savages, since everyone would desire that others recognize their superior worth, while at the same time failing to acknowledge the worth that others desire. There is nothing intrinsically sociable about self-liking (*FB II*, 132-134). The problems it poses amongst uncivilized peoples, however, are remedied by the development of politeness, which must have developed spontaneously, without reflection, over a great period of time (*FB II*, 138-141). If we were to declare our true sentiments around others then we would become insufferable to them, but we gradually learn to hide these sentiments so as not to offend those whose approval we desire. This is what good manners and politeness are all about for Mandeville, and they originate in self-liking. There is, therefore, an element of deceit inherent in human sociability, for it is only by concealing our natural sentiments that we appear sociable to others.

Mandeville turns to address the question of sociability more directly in the fourth dialogue, where he situates himself between the extremes of Hobbes and Shaftesbury. To the former he attributes the position that we are “born with Hatred and Aversion, that makes us Wolves and Bears, to one another,” while the latter holds that there is “a natural Affection, that prompts [man] to love his species” (*FB II*, 177-178). Mandeville is concerned to explain precisely what it means to say that humans are sociable, and he distinguishes between two ideas of sociability. First, that humans are naturally more fond of society than other creatures; and, second, that the consequences of associating together turn out to be better for humans than for other animals. Mandeville denies the first of these ideas. Anticipating an argument now associated more with Rousseau, he claims that savages would have had few desires and thus little need of society. It is difficult for those of us born into society, he later adds, to imagine the simplicity of savage life (*FB II*, 285). We become fond of society once industry and society have given rise to ever-increasing desires, but it is only amongst civilized people that the “Love Man has for his Ease and Security, and his perpetual Desire for meliorating his Condition, must be sufficient Motives

to make him fond of society” (*FB II*, 180-181). This fondness for society is the effect, rather than the cause, of humans associating together.

Mandeville thinks that the second idea of human sociability has more going for it. We strive for our own happiness and over time we chance upon discoveries that eventually lead to the establishment of political societies. Somewhat paradoxically, we become sociable “only by living together in society.” Humans are designed for society in much the same way that grapes are for wine; it is only by being carefully squeezed together under the right conditions that sociability emerges (*FB II*, 185, 188-189). Mandeville’s overriding point, then, is that it is only as humans experience the benefits of social interaction that they start to become sociable themselves.

This account of human sociability provides the basis for the conjectural history of government in the final two dialogues. Mandeville again stresses that it would have taken many generations “and the Concurrence of many favourable Accidents” for societies to have formed from private families (*FB II*, 200). To explain the origins of government it is first necessary to identify the principle in human nature that would drive some people to govern others. This principle is the “Desire of Dominion,” or desire for superiority, which is a consequence of our pride (*FB II*, 204-205). Having identified this principle, the stages by which humans moved from families to society could be traced.

The first motive leading savages to associate together would be the danger posed by wild beasts (*FB II*, 230-232, 238-242). As families started living together in small societies, however, the greatest threat would soon become the pride and ambition of other people, leading to contention. Mandeville depicted this state of human development as miserable. People would not keep contracts longer than their interest in doing so lasted, and “their unruly Passions, and the Discords occasioned by them, would never suffer them to be happy.” It is the domineering passions based on pride and self-liking that make this state miserable, but, over a few generations, leaders would emerge who are able to find ways of curbing the passions of others through penalties and prohibitions, thereby making themselves obeyed (*FB II*, 266-268). Even at this stage, however, the administration of justice would be impractical and precarious. Stable government could not arise until language and writing are perfected. The final step to government, then, is the invention of letters, for

No Multitudes can live peaceably without Government; no Government can subsist without Laws; and no Laws can be effectual long, unless they are wrote down: The Consideration of this is alone sufficient to give us a great Insight into the Nature of Man (*FB II*, 269).

To explain the invention of letters, however, a more fundamental problem had to be addressed concerning the origins of speech or language, which Mandeville returned to later in the sixth dialogue. This problem was central to many eighteenth-century debates about the history of sociability and civilization, especially for Rousseau and Smith, and is important for assessing the extent to which Smith distanced himself from Mandeville.²⁴ In their most primitive condition, Mandeville argues, savages would have had no language and speech would have developed gradually over time. The original motive for speech would not have been the desire to make oneself understood, but, instead, the desire to persuade others. This persuasion could take the form of seeking praise for our actions and attributes, or of making others submit to our desires (*FB II*, 289). Either way, it is self-liking and the desire for dominion that explain the origins of speech; the “natural Ambition and strong Desire Men have to triumph over, as well as persuade others, are the occasion of all this” (*FB II*, 291).

Once speech is perfected and humans are governed by written laws, great progress could finally be made: property and safety may be secured, the division of labor occurs and industry increases, with the “Love of Peace” spreading as the benefits of civilized society become widely recognized (*FB II*, 283-284). It is only once regular laws are established and observed that “Multitudes may be kept in tolerable Concord among themselves,” which is impossible until human understanding has advanced well beyond the state of savages (*FB II*, 300). Mandeville’s conjectural history of government, then, focuses on showing how self-liking, or pride, and the consequent desire for dominion, play out in different stages of the move from savage to civilized society. He stresses that the more civilized we

²⁴ For helpful analysis of this wider debate and Mandeville’s place in reviving an Epicurean account of the origin of languages see Avi Lifschitz, *Language and Enlightenment: The Berlin Debates of the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 16-38.

become the more injurious we find it to have our true nature seen (*FB* II, 303). We are at greater pains to ensure that others think highly of us, and we thus put on a façade to conceal our natural sentiments and appear sociable to others.

This is not an explanation of sociability that would be particularly attractive to anyone who thinks that humans are naturally moral or sociable creatures. Much of Mandeville's infamy rested on his attempt to explain away any inherently sociable or moral characteristics in terms of self-liking and pride. Nonetheless, he still regarded civilized society as a clear improvement on savage life. But, as Smith saw so perceptively, Rousseau was able to adopt Mandeville's moral psychology to articulate a penetrating critique of modern society.

Rousseau appears to have read volume two of the *Fable* closely and at times almost seems to be paraphrasing the French translation.²⁵ While it is unlikely Smith would have noticed this, some of the parallels between Mandeville's and Rousseau's accounts would have been evident. They begin from a similar starting point: the denial of natural sociability. While Rousseau identifies pity as a distinct principle from self-love (*amour de soi-même*), he also distances this principle from sociability (*DOI*, 15). Pity is a natural aversion to witnessing the suffering of others, but, as Smith recognized, this is still some way short of a desire to seek society for its own sake. For Rousseau, it would have taken a great deal of time and chance circumstances for humans to be drawn together in societies. Like Mandeville, he recognizes that part of the problem here involves explaining the origins of language, and although he does not offer a solution to the problem in the *Discourse*, he presents the problem in such a way as to reinforce the difficulties with maintaining that humans are naturally sociable (*DOI*, 33-34).

The most important differences between Mandeville's and Rousseau's conjectural histories concern the earliest stages of human development. Rousseau ridicules the idea that savages would have been driven to unite through fear of wild beasts (*DOI*, 22), and it takes him much longer to arrive at the point where the desire to be esteemed by others leads to contention. As has often been noted, Rousseau's distinction between *amour de soi-même* and *amour-propre* approximates Mandeville's distinction

²⁵ Hundert, *Enlightenment's Fable*, 113.

between self-love and self-liking (*DOI*, 91).²⁶ Rousseau, however, views *amour-propre* as a historically contingent passion, and by charting the development and interaction of pity and *amour-propre* he could conceive a pre-agricultural stage in human history where families would have united together into small societies, without being driven into conflict by their desire for the approval of others. On reflection, Rousseau claims, this state must have been “the best for man” (*DOI*, 48).

The recovery of this golden age in human history provided Rousseau with an evaluative benchmark against which subsequent developments could be viewed as corrupting the species, which is ultimately why he diverged so sharply from Mandeville and other defenders of commercial society at the time.²⁷ The comparison of savage and civilized societies was crucial to the evaluation of the latter, and on this point Mandeville and Rousseau clearly disagreed. Nonetheless, when it came to explaining social interaction in more developed societies they had a very similar story to tell.²⁸ For Rousseau, *amour-propre*, or Mandeville’s self-liking, became a problem as the commercial arts started to develop and the division of labor occurred, especially following the revolutions of metallurgy and agriculture. It is only with the development of agriculture that property in land first becomes recognized and inequalities between people are multiplied (*DOI*, 48-51). It was at this stage, with *amour-propre* dominant, that

... for one’s own advantage, it was necessary to appear to be other than what one in fact was. To be and to seem to be became two altogether different things; and from this distinction came conspicuous ostentation, deceptive cunning, and all the vices that follow from them. ... in a word, competition and rivalry on one hand, opposition of interest on

²⁶ Jack, “Mandeville and Rousseau,” 121-122; Force, *Self-Interest before Smith*, 65; Jerrold Seigel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 116; Christopher Brooke, *Philosophic Pride: Stoicism and Political Thought from Lipsius to Rousseau* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), 182-184.

²⁷ See Robin Douglass, *Rousseau and Hobbes: Nature, Free Will, and the Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015), 82-93.

²⁸ See also Rasmussen, *Problems and Promise*, 63-64.

the other; and always the hidden desire to profit at the expense of others. All these evils are the first effect of property and the inseparable consequence of nascent inequality (*DOI*, 51-52).

Smith translated this passage at length, as he did Rousseau's later comparison between the savage who "lives within himself" and the "sociable man" who lives "only in the opinion of others," for whom everything "is reduced to appearances, everything becomes artificial and deceptive" (*DOI*, 66; *ER*, 252-253). Rousseau agreed with Mandeville that what passes for sociability in modern societies is based on deceit and hypocrisy, but he went much further in stressing that the extent of artifice and dissimulation is accentuated by increased commercial activity under conditions of inequality. Modern society places us in competition with one another, yet we still have to appeal to the interest and opinion of others to survive; we compete for reputation and the esteem of others as much as we do for material goods. It is precisely the gulf that opens up between how we really are and how we must appear to others that makes civilized life so miserable on Rousseau's account.

In charting the rise of *amour-propre* in the development of modern society, Rousseau channeled Mandeville's ideas about how self-liking leads us to put on a mask of sociability. Where for Mandeville self-liking and the desire for dominion characterize our social condition, for Rousseau (to quote again from a passage Smith translated), it is only once "the words *power* and *reputation*" come to mean something that human misery ensues (*DOI*, 66; *ER*, 253). In each case, modern society is characterized by our living in the opinion of others and putting on whatever sort of façade is necessary to acquire the reputation we desire. This is the challenge to which anyone who sought to defend the moral character of commercial society would have to respond. Smith took the challenge seriously.

Smith's Response to the Mandevillean Challenge

The "Letter to the *Edinburgh Review*" indicates that Smith recognized the extent to which Rousseau's critique of modern society was based on Mandeville's principles. Indeed, it is plausible to think that the publication of the *Discourse on Inequality* alerted Smith to the fact that the most troubling ethical

questions Mandeville raised had been avoided by those like Hume, who took a more favorable stance towards modern commerce.²⁹ In what ways, then, did Smith respond to the challenge articulated by Mandeville and channeled through Rousseau, and how successful was he in distancing his own thought from their positions?

Part of Smith's response involved repudiating some of the principles of human nature on which Mandeville's position rested. There are reasons to think that Mandeville and Rousseau were in Smith's sights from the opening paragraphs of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, published only three years after the "Letter." Many scholars have discussed the extent to which Smith's principle of sympathy engages with Mandeville and/or Rousseau.³⁰ While sympathy underpins Smith's moral philosophy, it is arguably the love of praiseworthiness that provides his most direct response to the position he attributed to Mandeville and Rousseau: the denial of any desire leading us to seek society for its own sake. Mandeville's self-liking and Rousseau's *amour-propre* lead us to desire the high opinion or praise of others, irrespective of whether that praise is really merited. But Smith insists that nature has implanted another principle in man:

Nature, accordingly, has endowed him, not only with a desire of being approved of, but with a desire of being what ought to be approved of; or of being what he himself approves of in other men. The first desire could only have made him wish to appear to be fit for society. The second was necessary in order to render him really fit (*TMS*, III.2.7).

²⁹ Phillipson, *Enlightened Life*, 141-148.

³⁰ Leigh, "Rousseau and the Scottish Enlightenment," 12; Kerkhof, "A fatal attraction?" 233; Pack, "Rousseau-Smith Connection," 45-46; Force, *Self-Interest before Smith*, 14-20; Griswold, "Smith and Rousseau," 61-64; Phillipson, *Enlightened Life*, 149-150; Hont, *Politics in Commercial Society*, 27-28; Stimson, "Smith and Rousseau on Sociability and Inequality," 358-361.

Where Mandeville and Rousseau (arguably) focused only on the first desire, for Smith the second is all-important. In addressing the question of human sociability here,³¹ Smith counters the distinction between appearance and reality that Rousseau had emphasized (in passages Smith translated). The façade of sociability Mandeville and Rousseau had depicted is precisely that—pseudo-sociability—but Smith insists that there are principles in human nature that can make us genuinely fit for society. We desire the approbation of an impartial spectator, who sees our motives clearly and would disapprove of us deceiving others for our own gain, even if we would receive unmerited praise in doing so. Crucially, for Smith, the love of praiseworthiness cannot be reduced to the love of praise. We do not seek to be praiseworthy just so we receive praise. The virtuous amongst us would be content with performing praiseworthy actions even if no actual praise was forthcoming. If anything, indeed, it is the other way around, and we desire the praise of others because this strengthens our sense that we are genuinely praiseworthy (*TMS*, III.2.3). There is, then, nothing objectionable about the love of praise itself, except for when we desire praise where none is due, which would be “the effect only of the most contemptible vanity” (*TMS*, III.2.8). At various points Smith indicates that the praise/praiseworthy distinction confutes Mandeville (*TMS*, III.2.27, VII.ii.4.7), and, in light of the “Letter,” the distinction could be taken as a way of answering Rousseau too.³² Mandeville had been right to stress the extent to which we desire the esteem and approbation of others (*TMS*, VII.ii.4.10-11), but wrong to think that that we desire this irrespective of whether we merit such approbation.

³¹ Smith never uses the term “sociability”—probably to distance himself from Francis Hutcheson—but passages like these (and those on “social” and “unsocial” passions) indicate that he is addressing similar questions to Mandeville and Rousseau. To clarify, when I refer to genuinely sociable sentiments in Smith, I mean sentiments that lead us to seek society for its own sake (i.e. the view of sociability that Smith claims Mandeville and Rousseau reject in the “Letter”). Smith himself lists “Generosity, humanity, kindness, compassion, mutual friendship and esteem, all the social and benevolent affections” under the “social” passions (*TMS*, I.ii.4.1).

³² Ignatieff, “Republic of Needs,” 200-201; Hanley, “Commerce and Corruption,” 141-144; Rasmussen, *Problems and Promise*, 118-119; Phillipson, *Enlightened Life*, 156; but cf. Sagar, “Smith and Rousseau.”

While Mandeville never used the phrase love of praiseworthiness, he did consider the possibility that we are motivated by such a desire: “if Reason in Man was of equal weight with his Pride, he could never be pleas’d with Praises, which he is conscious he don’t deserve” (*FB* I, 63). But pride is far more powerful than reason. The desire for unmerited praise, and aversion to being justly blamed, is often to be observed, especially amongst children who have not yet learned to hide their passions in such a way as to make them appear more sociable than they really are.³³ Even if Smith was right to identify the love of praiseworthiness as an independent principle from the love of praise, Mandeville could still counter that the former fails to explain much about human behavior in modern society. To put the point another way, even if it is granted that we are naturally sympathetic creatures who desire to be praiseworthy, more needs to be said to distance Smith’s analysis of commercial society from Mandeville’s and Rousseau’s: it needs to be shown that these genuinely sociable sentiments are at play in such societies. Smith also took up this challenge, with mixed success.³⁴

As is evident from the “Letter,” Smith was not persuaded by Rousseau’s portrayal of savage life. By contrast, he thought it counted strongly in civilized society’s favor that even its poorest day-laborers enjoy more of the conveniences of life than a savage chief or Indian prince (*LJ*, 338-341, 489, 521-2; *WN*, I.i.11). In this respect, he might be viewed as having restated the Mandevillean argument about the misery of savage life against Rousseau. But in another respect he took issue with both

³³ Bernard Mandeville, *An Enquiry Into the Origin of Honour and the Usefulness of Christianity in War* (London, 1732), 7-8.

³⁴ In taking up this challenge, Smith never explicitly claims to be responding to Mandeville and/or Rousseau, and my interpretation thus encounters a similar problem to that faced by much of the existing scholarship on Smith’s engagement with Rousseau. The claim that Smith had Mandeville and/or Rousseau in mind at different points where neither is mentioned is plausible, but remains somewhat speculative. However, my argument need not rest on such a strong claim. My weaker and less speculative claim is simply that Smith addressed the issues raised by the Mandevillean challenge, irrespective of whether he saw himself as responding to Mandeville and/or Rousseau directly. As the preceding analysis hopefully establishes, Smith would have been well aware of Mandeville’s and Rousseau’s views on these issues, and had gestured towards them explicitly in the “Letter.”

Mandeville's and Rousseau's accounts of the difference between savage and civilized life. Mandeville and Rousseau both granted the existence of pity, which is the closest thing in their theories to a naturally sociable sentiment. Yet, as Smith noted in the "Letter," they both claimed that this sentiment is strongest amongst savages and weakens with the development of society. At a number of points in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, however, Smith maintains that sociable sentiments are more prevalent in civilized societies than savage ones.

Smith thought that the security and affluence characteristic of civilized nations allows for the virtues "founded upon humanity" (humanity being a "social" passion) to be cultivated more than the virtues "founded upon self-denial and the command of the passions." In savage nations, where all struggle to secure their own subsistence, the opposite is true: savages lack sympathy with one another and interact more as strangers than as friends. It is only once people become more comfortable in securing the necessities of life that they are able to express their emotions more freely and develop greater sensibility towards the sentiments of others. Crucially, for Smith—in stark contrast to Mandeville and Rousseau—it is savages who most often have to conceal their passions from others and thus acquire "habits of falsehood and dissimulation," whereas civilized people are more open and sincere (*TMS*, V.2.8-13). It is not just inherently sociable sentiments that Smith thinks are more cultivated in civilized societies, but also the sentiments of justice (*TMS*, VII.iv.36) and those associated with prudence, such as probity and punctuality, which are almost unknown in barbarous nations and develop only with the introduction of commerce (*LJ*, 528, 538-539). While justice and prudence are not inherently sociable sentiments, their prominence does help to deflect the charge that commercial society is characterized by deceit. The "prudent man," Smith claims, while "not always much disposed to general sociality," nevertheless steers clear of "the cunning devices of an artful imposter" and "is always sincere" (*TMS*, VI.i.7-9).³⁵

Where Mandeville and Rousseau saw deceit and hypocrisy as central to an analysis of commercial society, Smith thought that these vices were less to be found in commercial societies than

³⁵ Similarly, the virtue of justice is based on sympathizing with the victim's resentment, but resentment itself is an "unsocial passion" (*TMS*, I.ii.3.1-8; II.ii.1-3).

in savage or barbarian ones. In this respect he clearly distanced himself from the Mandevillean analysis, but other tensions remain when assessing the moral character of commercial society. Perhaps the most famous of these concerns Smith's worries about the effects of the division of labor, which, amongst its many degrading tendencies, renders the laboring poor incapable "of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment," and threatens to extinguish "all the nobler parts of the human character" (*WN*, V.i.f.50-51; see also *LJ*, 539-541). Here, however, I focus on a different tension that has received far less scrutiny, but which comes into sharper view in light of Mandeville's conjectural history from volume two of the *Fable*. That is, while Smith in many places avowed that sociable sentiments are more prevalent in commercial societies than in savage or barbarian ones, when explaining both the historical emergence and inner workings of commercial society he falls back on a much more Mandevillean position, where such sentiments seem to be doing very little explanatory work. A passage towards the end of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is particularly instructive:

The desire of being believed, the desire of persuading, of leading and directing other people, seems to be one of the strongest of all our natural desires. It is, perhaps, the instinct upon which is founded the faculty of speech, the characteristic faculty of human nature. ... Great ambition, the desire of real superiority, of leading and directing, seems to be altogether peculiar to man, and speech is that great instrument of ambition, of real superiority, of leading and directing the judgments and conduct of other people (*TMS*, VII.iv.25).

Smith speculates that the origins of language might be explained in terms of the desire to persuade others. While Mandeville is not mentioned explicitly here, the passage captures a great deal of his view on the relation between language, persuasion and self-liking from volume two of the *Fable*: not only is speech about persuading others, the reason why we seek to persuade others is that we desire superiority over them.³⁶ This point is crucial when examining the extent to which Smith distanced his analysis from

³⁶ Cf. Samuel Fleischacker, *On Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations: A Philosophical Companion* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 93-94, who argues that persuasion recognizes the independence of

Mandeville, but it has rarely received any scholarly attention.³⁷ It has at least two important implications.

First, the natural desire we have to persuade others is the principle from which the propensity to truck, barter and exchange derives. This propensity, in turn, gives rise to the arts, commerce and division of labor, which eventually lead to the great opulence and wealth of modern commercial societies (*LJ* 352, 493-494, 527; *WN*, I.ii.1-2). In short, the propensity to barter—derived from the desire to persuade others—does much of the explanatory work in Smith’s history of modern society. There is, however, nothing inherently sociable about this all-important desire in explaining the eventual development of commerce; “it is not marked with anything amiable” (*LJ*, 527), but, as Mandeville stressed, is bound up with self-liking and superiority. It is worth remembering this when Smith writes that a commercial society is one in which everyone “becomes in some measure a merchant” (*WN*, I.iv.1). It is far from evident that there is anything genuinely sociable about the interactions that characterize such societies; after all, society subsists amongst merchants “from a sense of its utility, without any mutual love of affection” (*TMS*, II.ii.3.2). The social bonds that characterize commercial society, then, are in fact more akin to the second of the two ideas of sociability Mandeville canvassed than the first: humans are sociable in the sense that they come to recognize the benefits of associating together, not because they are naturally fond of society.³⁸

Second, the desire of persuading others is closely related to ambition, which has an important role in Smith’s theory. The distinction of ranks that preserves peace and order in society is based on ambition, which, despite being a selfish passion, is nonetheless admirable when kept within the bounds of prudence and justice (*TMS*, III.6.6-7). Yet the admiration accorded to the higher ranks in society

those we seek to persuade and shows them respect. Fleischacker is right to argue that persuasion has more favorable connotations than force, but he downplays its association with the desire for superiority.

³⁷ A notable exception is Kerkhof, “A fatal attraction?” 232-233, but he does not discuss this point in any detail.

³⁸ This is not to deny that Smith thinks that humans naturally desire the company of others and take pleasure in mutual sympathy. My claim, more specifically, is simply that this desire does not characterize the social bonds associated distinctively with commercial society.

might be viewed as a problem for reasons similar to those Mandeville and Rousseau diagnosed. In the sixth edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1790), Smith adds a chapter on the corruption of our moral sentiments—directly following the chapter on ambition and the distinction of ranks—which has been taken as evidence that he was still concerned with the challenge posed by Mandeville and Rousseau right down to the end of his life.³⁹ The way Smith deals with the worry about corruption helps to illustrate both the extent and limitations of his attempt to distance himself from Mandeville’s principles.

“The great mob of mankind,” Smith recognizes, admire power and riches more than virtue and wisdom, and this threatens to corrupt our moral sentiments. While virtue and wisdom are praiseworthy, power and riches are far more reliable objects of praise, irrespective of their merit. This creates a problem because “we desire both to be respectable and to be respected”—or to be both praised and praiseworthy—and these desires can pull us in different directions (*TMS*, I.iii.3.2). The problem, as Mandeville and Rousseau had highlighted, is that doing what is praiseworthy is not always the best way to satisfy our desire for praise (our self-liking or *amour-propre*). Smith’s response is telling. While he acknowledges that this is the case at the highest echelons of society,⁴⁰ he denies that it applies to “the middling and inferior stations of life, [where] the road to virtue and that to fortune ... are, happily, in most cases, very nearly the same.” For most of us, he claims, “honesty is the best policy” (*TMS*, I.iii.3.5).

This response involves denying the prevalence of the problem as Mandeville and Rousseau saw it. Once again, Smith rejects the idea that hypocrisy and deceit are the best ways to advance our interests in civilized societies. Prudence and honesty instead provide the surest path to bettering our condition. However, Smith does not deny that when the desires for praise and praiseworthiness come into conflict the former will most often prevail. Mandeville and Rousseau may well have been right about this, but

³⁹ John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 394.

⁴⁰ Indeed, at points Smith suggests that “the rich and the great” become less sociable and generous as feudalism gives way to commercial society, as their fortunes are increasingly spent on “frivolous objects” that display “a base and selfish disposition,” rather than in hospitality (*WN*, II.iii.42, II.iv.5).

it is the fortunate contrivance of nature that this tension does not affect most of us, most of the time. To put the point another way, Smith simply disagreed with Mandeville and Rousseau on the question of how best to satisfy prudence and self-liking in commercial society, but it remains these passions, rather than any genuinely sociable sentiments, that are key to understanding how commercial society operates.

In what sense, then, is there a tension in Smith's response to the Mandevillean challenge? Against Mandeville (and perhaps Rousseau), Smith insists that we desire not just to be praised, but to be praiseworthy, and the latter desire (neglected by Mandeville) renders us genuinely sociable. What is more, challenging the position he attributed to Mandeville and Rousseau in the "Letter," Smith claims that our sociable sentiments are more refined and widespread in civilized societies, in comparison with savage societies, where falsehood and dissimulation are rife. However, the tension arises given that the love of praiseworthiness and the more sociable sentiments Smith associates with civilized societies appear to be doing very little explanatory work when he comes to analyze how commercial society originates and operates. Indeed, love of praiseworthiness—as opposed to love of praise—arguably does no explanatory work for Smith in explaining either the historical development towards commercial society or how a commercial society actually functions. For these explanations, Smith reverts to a much more Mandevillean position, where the desire to persuade others and ambition play a much greater role.

Conclusion

The point of departure for this article was Smith's "Letter to the *Edinburgh Review*," where he claims that Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* was inspired by volume two of Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*. While much recent scholarship has drawn on the "Letter" to analyze Smith's response to Rousseau, the question of why he associated the *Discourse* with volume two of the *Fable* has been largely neglected. This neglect is especially surprising given that the "Letter" is the one place where Smith situates Rousseau's work in a specific intellectual context; it is thus one of the few clues we have for trying to work out what he saw in Rousseau. If what I have argued here is right, the "Letter" indicates that Smith was as much troubled by Mandeville—and arguably more so—than he was by Rousseau, contrary to the impression given by much recent scholarship on Rousseau and Smith.

To put my the significance of my argument into a broader perspective, consider a fictional analogy. Imagine that Anne, an up-and-coming philosopher, reviews a new work by Ben, another up-and-coming philosopher. At the beginning of Anne's review she notes that John Rawls's *Political Liberalism* seems to have given rise to the principles at the heart of Ben's philosophy, before highlighting some of the main points of comparison between their works. Anne and Ben become two of the leading thinkers of their generation, and later—perhaps centuries later—others become interested in the intellectual relationship between them. Not so many people then read Rawls as they do today. Anne's review is frequently invoked as a key piece of evidence showing the extent to which she was occupied with Ben's philosophy during a formative period of her intellectual career. Occasionally people make passing reference to Rawls's influence on Anne and/or Ben, while perhaps quoting an odd passage from *A Theory of Justice*, despite Anne's signaling that it is *Political Liberalism* that really matters.

Something similar, I suggest, is how the relationship between Smith, Rousseau and Mandeville has been presented in much recent scholarship. One aim of this article has simply been to encourage Smith scholars to attend more closely to volume two of the *Fable*. None of this is to deny that Smith was concerned with Rousseau's thought, but what made Rousseau especially interesting was the way he turned Mandeville's principles into a powerful critique of commercial society. To answer that critique, Smith ultimately had to distance his own defense of commercial society from Mandeville's principles.

I have argued that although Smith succeeded in distancing his analysis of the moral character of commercial society from Mandeville and Rousseau up to a point, in important respects he remained far more Mandevillean than he would ever have acknowledged. This is because Smith's own views on human sociability were not as far removed from volume two of the *Fable* as his praise/praiseworthiness distinction might lead us to think. Much like Mandeville, Smith thought that we are driven by desires for superiority and persuading others, which give rise to ambition and the propensity to truck, barter and exchange. Where Rousseau argued that such desires, associated with *amour-propre*, become increasingly inflamed and divisive with the development of modern society, Smith (following Mandeville) thought that in commercial societies these desires are harnessed in less harmful ways than

in earlier forms of society. Smith may not have regarded these desires as inherently vicious in Mandeville's sense, but nor did he regard them as genuinely sociable.

Reconstructing Smith's engagement with Mandeville and Rousseau helps us to see precisely what was at stake between three of the most important interlocutors in the eighteenth-century debates on the moral character of commercial society. We must not be too prescriptive regarding what should be taken from past debates when confronting questions about the morality of commercial society—or capitalism—today, but an illustrative example might help to show how it can at least lead us to think more carefully about those questions. My example is taken from G. A. Cohen's *Why Not Socialism?*, which is particularly relevant given that Cohen was such a fierce critic of the moral motivations behind capitalism, and turned to both Mandeville and Smith to uncover its true nature. For Cohen, capitalism is based on the "repugnant motives" of greed and fear. Smith apparently recognized this, but "propounded a wholly instrumental justification of market motivation, in face of what he acknowledged to be its unattractive intrinsic character." In this respect, Smith supposedly followed the idea epitomized by Mandeville's subtitle: *Private Vices, Public Benefits*.⁴¹ Cohen's view, however, elides the very complexity of Smith's position—and that of the debate into which he intervened—which is precisely what makes that position so interesting.

Smith, of course, did justify commercial society on instrumental grounds, most notably in his famous invisible hand passage, which is often read as part of his response to Rousseau.⁴² There he makes the very Mandevillean point that the poor benefit from the "luxury and caprice" of the rich despite the selfishness of the latter (*TMS*, IV.1.10). This instrumental point is probably Smith's most celebrated justification of commercial society, but it is only one element in a wide-ranging defense. In particular, Cohen's contention that Smith considered capitalism intrinsically unattractive misses much of what was at stake between him and Mandeville (and Rousseau), for at least two reasons that the foregoing analysis illuminates.

⁴¹ Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* 77-79.

⁴² Ignatieff, *Needs of Strangers*, 111-113; Fleischacker, *Wealth of Nations*, 107-108; Brooke, *Philosophic Pride*, 205-206.

First, for Mandeville, Rousseau and Smith, the question whether commercial society is intrinsically unattractive largely turned on whether it results in us becoming more hypocritical and deceitful than we would otherwise be (in non-commercial societies), or whether it promotes openness and sincerity. On this question, Smith's position was in stark opposition to Mandeville's and Rousseau's. Second, Smith thought that commercial society was characterized by the virtues of prudence and justice, rather than the repugnant motives of fear and greed. Indeed, while self-love is central to Smith's analysis of commercial society, he maintained that amongst most people it manifests itself in the virtue of prudence far more than the vice of greed, or avarice. This is not to suggest that Smith's analysis should be taken as the last word on the subject, but the questions that separated him from Mandeville and Rousseau are still worth asking if we are concerned with the morality of capitalism. Returning to these debates, then, is one way to broaden our perspective on the questions we should be asking, which is not to say that our answers should be the same. But if the principles of Mandeville, channeled through Rousseau, still present one of the greatest challenges to those who defend the moral character of commercial society, then Smith still provides one of the most thoughtful answers to that challenge, precisely because he took it so seriously.